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ABSTRACT

University Student Census (USC) data of incoming freshman commuters at the University of Maryland, College Park, for 1973, 1974 and 1975 are examined. The respective samples numbered 1467, 588, and 858 students who were enrolling for the Fall semester and who planned to live off-campus. The report is divided into three sections: (1) a composite description of the typical incoming freshman commuter for each of the three years; (2) a summary of trends or directions in four areas: demographic variables, attitudes and expectations toward the university, attitudes toward social issues, and commuter needs; and (3) a sketch of a hypothetical commuter of the future and a discussion of his/her anticipated needs. Results over the past three years show that there is an increase in concern over the economy as the most important issue for society to resolve; commuters are living closer to campus; fewer students are working; they report high school grade point averages of "B'"; more commuters' fathers have college degrees; the University of Maryland is their first choice of school because of its location; more commuters' educational objectives are to study beyond the bachelor's degree; the vocational value of education is becoming more important; more commuters expect to get involved in campus activities; most take a neutral stance on such social issues as recruiting blacks and black and womens' studies programs; and there is some increase in interest in busing service to suburbs and adjoining cities. (Author/MSE)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF INCOMING FRESHMEN COMMUTER STUDENTS, 1973-75

Margaret E. Foster, William E. Sedlacek
and Mark W. Hardwick

Research Report # 6-75

Research Report Sponsored by the
Office of Commuter Affairs

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SUMMARY

This report compares University Student Census (USC) data of incoming freshman commuters for 1973, 1974 and 1975. The respective samples numbered 1467, 588, and 858 students who were enrolling for the Fall semester and who planned to live off-campus.

The report is divided into three sections: (1) a composite description of the typical incoming freshman commuter for each of the three years; (2) a summary of trends or directions in four areas: demographic variables, attitudes and expectations toward the University, attitudes toward social issues, and commuter needs; (3) a sketch of a hypothetical commuter of the future and a discussion of his/her anticipated needs.

A summary of results over the past three years show that there is an increase in concern over the economy as the most important issue for society to resolve; commuters are living closer to campus; fewer students are working; they report high school grade point averages of "B" ; more commuters' fathers have college degrees; the University of Maryland is their first choice of school because of its location; more commuters' educational objectives are to study beyond the bachelor's degree; the vocational value of education is becoming more important; more commuters expect to get involved in campus activities; most take a neutral stance on such social issues as recruiting blacks and black and womens' studies programs; and there is some increase in interest in busing service to suburbs and adjoining cities.

There is a basic and long-standing need for data describing and summarizing characteristics, needs and attitudes of commuter students at the University of Maryland. This report is intended to begin filling that void by comparing data for incoming freshman commuters for 1973, 1974, and 1975.

The report is divided into three sections: first, a composite picture of the typical incoming commuter for each year will be presented. Second, what appear to be notable commuter characteristic trends or directions have been summarized across four dimensions: demographic variables, attitudes and expectations toward the University and education in general, attitudes toward social issues, and commuter needs. And, finally, a hypothetical commuter of tomorrow is sketched and program planning relevant to his/her anticipated needs is discussed.

The responses of incoming commuter freshmen samples from the Fall semesters of 1973 (N=1467: females, 623, males, 722, unclassified, 122); 1974 (N=588: females, 315, males, 272, unclassified, 1); and 1975 (N=858: females, 365, males, 478, unclassified, 11) to the University Student Census (USC) are described and compared. Each summer the Research Unit of the Counseling Center administers the USC to a representative sample of entering freshmen. The USC contains items dealing with incoming students' attitudes and characteristics on demographic, educational, and social variables. The items concern past experiences as well as expectations of future experiences.

For purposes of this study, a freshman commuter is defined as an incoming freshman enrolling in college for the first time, who expects to be living off-campus in other than a fraternity or sorority house. Therefore, the present samples of freshmen commuters include students who, while they anticipate living off-campus, have not in actuality been commuting. A second point is that only 39 items have consistently appeared across the three-year sample. However, some new and interesting paterns have appeared between 1974 and 1975 and have been referred to as directions rather than trends. The statement that a trend or a direction

is occurring means a 5% or greater change in a particular response pattern between years. When three percentage figures are reported, such as 30%-35%-40%, these numbers correspond to the fall 1973, 1974 and 1975 semesters respectively. If there was a difference in response patterns between men and women of greater than 4%, sex differences are noted.

Composite Profile

The following is a composite sketch of the incoming freshmen commuters for each of the past three years. The description is of a hypothetical commuter and summarizes his most salient characteristics.

The 1973 incoming freshman commuter is a Marylander, living with family members, and traveling from 11 to 50 miles to campus. His/her father, who was the greatest influence on the student's going to college, is a college graduate, while his mother has achieved a high school diploma. The student expects that studying efficiently will be his hardest problem in adjusting to college, while getting to know and meet other students will be his/her easiest task. This freshman comes from a public high school, plans to earn at least a bachelor's degree, but has not decided on a vocational goal. Ecology and pollution are seen as the most important social issues for society to resolve. Social life and friendships made, more than academic or work experiences, have contributed to his/her development. He/she is neutral to or disagrees with enrolling in black study or womens' study courses or with the University actively recruiting minority group members. He/she views social demonstrations as a waste of time. The student's primary educational objective is to acquire skills applicable to a job.

The 1974 incoming freshman commuter shares many similar characteristics with his/her '73 contemporary. Examples include a laissez-faire attitude toward involvement in social issues and lack of interest in black or womens' studies programs. While he/she continues to anticipate that studying efficiently will be the major

adjustment to college, budgeting time is becoming an increasingly important concern. While the '74 commuter also wants to complete graduation requirements so he/she can enter his/her desired vocation, he/she is more interested than the '73 commuter in going on to graduate school. The '74 commuter decided upon his/her current vocational goal during the senior year in high school and expects to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and probably some graduate credits. He/she is less concerned about ecology and now attaches more importance to the economy. The incoming freshman commuter anticipates being satisfied with the University and expects to earn a "B" average. Interestingly, he/she is the first among his siblings to attend college. The most important factor in a long-term career choice is working with ideas and people and an intrinsic interest in the field. He/she is interested in busing service from the D.C. suburbs and would probably be willing to pay a mandatory fee for a campus shuttle bus service.

The 1975 incoming freshman commuter expects that studying efficiently and budgeting time wisely will be equally difficult in adjusting to college. The '75 commuter is even more indifferent or opposed to recruiting blacks than his/her commuter predecessors, and will probably not be enrolling in black or womens' study courses. He/she plans to earn at least the bachelor's degree because it will enable him /her to enter a chosen job or graduate school. In contrast to the '73 and '74 commuters, the '75 commuter is more likely to pursue education beyond the bachelor's level. Though he/she will probably live with the family, there is a greater probability of living independently alone or with peers. Acquiring skills apllicable to a career is notably the most important educational objective, and concern for the economy is even greater than in the preceding year. The '75 commuter has a greater probability of being unemployed yet seeking work. The most important considerations in a long-term career choice are working with people, job openings, and rapid advancement. He/she anticipates seeking counseling for educational-vocational plans, feels anxious about succeeding in college, and is concerned over

financing his/her college education. The students disagreed with the statement "Our country should place less emphasis on working hard."

Demographic Variables:

One of the most notable changes occurring from 1973 to 1975 is the increasing amount of concern that freshmen commuters have over the economic state of the U.S. (13%-27%-36%). There has been a 23% increase in the proportion of commuters who consider the economy to be the most important issue for society to resolve. Interest in such issues as ecology (34%-22%-20%) and racism (16%-15%-12%) appears to be fading and is being replaced with concerns over the job market and related issues.

As for living arrangements, incoming freshmen commuters plan to be residing closer to the campus. About one-half expect to be living within a 10-mile radius and there has been a 5% increase in the proportion who plan to live within less than a five mile radius. There is considerable evidence that fewer commuters expect to be living in a dependent arrangement with family or relatives (87%-83%-72%) and more frequently in an independent arrangement(13%-17%-27%) such as sharing an apartment with a peer or living alone. Though approximately half of the commuters continue to work in some capacity (54%-49%-46%), there has been a 6% increase over the three years in the proportion who don't work, but would like to work (21%-22%-27%). Earnings appear to have plateaued over the past three years. Most commuters report earnings of from $20 to $75 per week from their part-time jobs (42%-45%-44%) and more than 90% earned less than $3000 yearly. The ratio of males to females increases as earnings rise (e.g., 1974, earning $1,000-$2,999: 18% F, 40% M).

The high school academic background of incoming commuters is adequate as judged by the majority (1974: 63%, 1975: 69%) of the students responding that they achieved a grade point average of "B". However, there is some movement away

from superior academic performance (GPA's of "A" dropped from 27% to 17% in the past two years). An increasing proportion (67% to 75%, from '74 to '75) of incoming commuters decided upon their present vocational goal during their senior year in high school, with women tending to decide somewhat earlier than men (e.g., decided before 9th grade: 12% F, 6%M).

Although most commuters say they have lived in the State of Maryland during the past five years of their lives, a noticeable and increasing proportion (1974: 31%, 1975: 37%) indicate that they have lived in countries or states other than Maryland. There is a steadily increasing percentage of fathers of commuters who have earned a college degree (44%-45%-49%). Although the majority of incoming commuter students say their mothers have only a high school diploma, an increasing proportion of them report that their mothers have obtained a college degree (20%-24%-28%).

Attitudes and Expectations Toward the University and Education:

The University of Maryland has been the first choice of the majority of incoming freshmen and is becoming even more so (1973: 60%; 1975: 65%). While the main reason students decided to attend Maryland is because of its location (31%-32%-29%), this variable is loosing some ground to the response "because Maryland has the academic program I wanted" (22%-30%-27%). There is a consistant and clear pattern showing that fathers have been and continue to be the most important influence in both male and female students' decision to attend college (39%-[33%F, 44%M]; 37% [33%F, 42%M]; 39% [31%F, 44%M]). Mothers, especially for female students, run a close second (27%[33%F, 23%M]; 18%[22%F, 14%M]; 21% [30%F, 15%M]); though a small, but steadily increasing number of students chose the option "friends" (5%-6%-9%).

More than one-third (38%-36%-33%) of the freshmen commuters expect to earn at least a bachelors degree. There is an increasing tendency, especially among males, to plan to go beyond the bachelors degree to one or more years of graduate

or professional school (50%-59%-62%). Consistently over the past three years, response patterns reveal that the higher the expected educational degree, the greater the proportion of males to females (e.g., 1975, B.A./B.S. degree as objective: 40% F, 28%M; M.D., D.D.S. as objective : 7%F, 15% M; L.B., J.D. as objective: 4%F, 9% M).

Noting that an important characteristic of the commuting freshmen students is their increasing concern over the economy, it is of interest to relate this trend to the response that "learning skills applicable to a career" is at an increasing rate the most important educational objective (38%: 34%F, 41%M ; 33%: 26%F, 41%M; 52%: 45%F, 58%M). This pattern clearly reflects a sex difference favoring males. Directions for career or life's work (1973: 25%, 1974: 28%) is the second most important educational objective. The most important factor to the incoming commuters in 1974 and 1975 in making their long-term career choice has consistently been working with people (19%). However, there is some diminishing concern over the intrinsic value of their career (1974: 20%, 1975: 14%),with a slight, though directional, change toward economic variables such as job openings and rapid career advancement (1974: 14%, 1975: 16%) and high anticipated earnings (1974: 8%, 1975: 12%) increasingly being considered. The major function of the University has regularly been seen as providing a general learning facility (1974: 44%, 1975: 45%), although the response of "preparing people for jobs" is increasing (1974: 9%, 1975: 13%). The most likely reason given by incoming commuters for thinking they will remain in school and complete graduation requirements is because the college degree is seen as the only way one can enter his chosen profession (26%, 30% [34%F, 26%M], 32% [35%F, 30%M]). It is noteworthy that finishing college to get a job is more characteristic of women. However, a considerably larger proportion of men view the degree as a necessity to enter graduate or professional school (18%: 14%F, 22%M; 22%: 17%F, 29%M; 20% : 15%F, 24%M).

Over the past two years there has been a moderate increase among incoming freshmen commuters who intend to get involved in University activities. Half of the incoming freshmen commuters expect that during their first year they will get involved in one or more activities. Only 10% do not expect to be involved. An increasing percentage of incoming commuters feel a part of the University (1973, 36% to 1975, 71%), and there is an increasingly strong expectation (20%-34%-40%) that the University will provide facilities and opportunities for individual creative activities. Specific activities such as athletics (27.5%) are consistently reported as favored by males, and special interest groups (22%) are of most interest to women. The majority of incoming commuters (1974, 64%; 1975, 69%) indicated that their parents will not have attended parent orientation during the summer. Anticipated non-support for Orientation is, interestingly, more characteristics of the parents of females and this appears to be a stable pattern. Non-academic functions appear to have contributed most to these students personal development during the past three years. About one-fourth (21%[19%F:24%M]; 24% [21%F:28%M]:24%) responsed that their social life was the most important factor effecting their development, and this pattern was especially true of males. The second most important developmental contribution, which was more important for females, was friendships made (21%: 24%F, 17%M; 21%: 24%F, 18%M; 22%).

Incoming commuting freshmen expect that the hardest part of adjusting to college will be learning to study efficiently (25%-23%-22%) while budgeting time wisely is reported to be of increasing concern (16%-19%-22%).

Social Issues:

Of the items on the USC that are related to attitudes toward social issues, commuters most frequently responded by selecting the neutral category. Though this category may reflect a variety of mental sets such as "I don't know", "I don't care", or "I haven't had a chance to think about that issue yet", it may also be interpreted as a laissez-faire type of attitude. For example, when asked

the best way for the State of Maryland to provide higher education to black and white students, an increasing proportion (37%-40%-43%) said they felt the State should let things happen naturally with no further program. Males report feeling more neutral while women generally feel more supportive of social intervention (e.g., 1974, "we should improve the quality of black colleges", 31%F:19%M). As to whether the University should actively recruit blacks, again the neutral response has increased and is up by 12% (40%-48%-52%), while a supportive attitude was down by 8% (26%-24%-18%). When asked if they would take a course in black or women's studies, the neutral item received the greatest proportion of responses (35%-41%-41%; 35%-37%-45% respectively). A somewhat different trend appears however, as approximately half of the commuters agree (52%-50%-50%) that the University should use its influence to improve social conditions in the State.

Commuter Needs:

Though commuters have varied in the degree to which they indicate a need for bus service, there is a small but clear shift toward interest in this subject. And women have generally indicated a greater interest in bus service. For example, almost half (49%-49%) of the commuters over the past two years indicated they are willing to pay a mandatory fee for campus shuttle bus service. About one-fourth are neutral, and one-fourth do not want to be assessed such a fee. Their main need for off-campus busing is, in descending order: direct busing from the suburbs (66%-67%), Washington, D.C. (31%-33%), and Baltimore (19%-22%), with a small percentage increase (approximately 6%) in general support for bus services over the past two years.

The Commuter of Tomorrow

Perhaps the most pragmatic and important reason for summarizing incoming freshmen commuter data across several years is to provide some type of predictive

data base so that we may speculate, on the basis of the limited evidence, what the commuter of tomorrow may be like. This could have relevance for future programming and planning development for the commuter student. The question then becomes how can we transpose research information from data into action?

A useful theoretical model against which one can conceptualize planning is person-environment theory. The person-environment (PXE) perspective (e.g., Levin, 1936; Murrary, 1938; Stern, 1970) holds that if there is to be development and growth among people - specifically students - there needs to be an optimal match between the characteristics of the person and an environment which will elicit and reinforce actualization of these needs. Therefore, if we have some idea as to the characteristics and needs of incoming freshmen commuters at the University of Maryland, what might some of the important environmental attributes be that could foster educational and personal development? Looking at one example, three years of USC data provides evidence that incoming freshmen commuters are becoming increasingly concerned over the economic state of our nation. We have also seen an expected increase in the importance that incoming freshmen commuters attribute to their education leading toward skill acquisition, jobs with good pay, advancement, etc. Additionally, the intrinsic value of learning and working is diminishing somewhat. This trend might be used to suggest something about program planning for commuters. For example, might student personnel workers-commuter affairs staff specifically-become more involved in securing financial aid or special scholarship funds? Or at least those professionals involved with commuters can systematically make commuters aware of these resources. In terms of curriculum planning, is the University offering sufficient academic programs that are utilitarian and specifically related to the future job market? Undoubtedly, this is a long-standing dilemna for those defenders of a "liberal arts" education. Perhaps students could be educated concerning the

more intrinsic, rather than materialistic, usefullness for acquiring higher education. Becoming educated may no longer be the most logical or valued rationale for increasing one's socioeconomic status. And, therefore, there may need to be a different justification for pursuing higher education today.

Job placement, either for post-graduation needs or part-time flexibly scheduled jobs for enrolled students, may redirect a trend and ease the strain for those commuters who are not working but hope to find jobs. This may also hold implication for career development, paid internships, or a part-time job bureau. Another item is that an increasing number of freshmen commuters expect to be living away from parents and relatives and are seeking independent living arrangements. This trend may suggest for the Off-Campus Housing Office that further cooperation and effort is needed in locating rooms, apartments and houses obtainable by commuters, and in providing information on legal rights and responsibilities.

A further issue that may have relevance to program planning is the observation that incoming commuters are showing an increasing tendency toward identifying with the University and being open to involvement in campus activities. If social life and friends are the major factors in contributing toward student development, might we not increasingly provide opportunities and channels by which commuters can participate in an activity group appropriate to their interests? This is a large challenge and clearly we need to look more closely at ways which facilitate social relationships and interactions among commuters. And since more incoming commuters are not working and are living closer to campus, perhaps there is a state of readiness to increase their involvement in activity and special interest groups.

One area of concern has to do with an increasing trend away from commuters' anticipating that their parents will not be attending orientation. Why? Has the USC data shed some light on the special needs or interests of commuters that are not

being dealt with through orientation? Sedlacek, et. al, (1975) found that commuters are functioning at a level of basic survival needs in terms of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy. This study provides additional evidence that personnel who are involved in commuter affairs need to be working toward meeting commuter students' basic needs for survival (e.g., a place to live, transportation, money, etc.) before moving on to higher level needs.

In terms of counseling needs, budgeting time and learning to study efficiently are areas in which commuters feel they may need help. Individual or group counseling related to time management and study skills would probably be welcome. Budgeting money and handling a variety of complex responsibilities (such as studying, raising children, managing a home, etc.) might be amenable to peer counseling such as the Star Center or other outreach peer counseling programs implemented by the Counseling Center.

The lack of enthusiasm among incoming feshmen commuters for such contemporary issues and activities as minority group concerns and womens' studies is a puzzle. Perhaps commuters are just too involved in meeting survival needs, are too pragmatic, or are not sufficiently informed about these matters. However, since most of the data covering three years of commuter characteristics suggests stereotypical and unchanging sex differences (e.g., males aspire to more education, make more money), it would appear that this population could be enlightened by a greater involvement or awareness of the womens' programs and racial problems at the University of Maryland.

In conclusion, it appears that incoming commuters are a diverse, dynamic, and changing portion of the University student population. And since they compose the majority of the student population (greater than 60% of the 1975 respondents to the USC expected to be living off-campus), a data based knowledge of who they are and what their expectations of the University environment are is critical for future program planning.

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